

**Older Americans and the World Wide Web:  
The New Wave of Internet Users  
Issue Forum of the Senate Special Committee on Aging  
Statement of Senator John Breaux, Ranking Member  
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When people think about the Internet, many assume that it is primarily for the young. Older Americans are often seen as lacking either the necessary ability, the interest, or both. The reality, however, could not be more different. All across the country, seniors are proving that they are fascinated by the Internet and that they have what it takes to learn how to use it. In fact, America's senior citizens are one of the fastest growing segments of the emerging Internet community.

But *why* are older Americans so drawn to this new electronic medium? The answer to this question is complex, because the elderly are such a diverse group. For those who might otherwise suffer from the emotional pain of loneliness, the Internet offers a powerful tool for maintaining social contacts with distant friends and family, through such activities as E-mail and chat rooms. Effortlessly transcending barriers of geographic distance or limited physical mobility, the Internet helps older users not only maintain existing ties but also develop new relationships with friends they would never otherwise have met.

In the world of work, the Internet also offers important opportunities, particularly to the growing number of seniors working past the age of 65. Many careers place growing emphasis on computer skills that older Americans did not have the need to learn earlier in their lives. In order to compete effectively with younger workers, who are generally much more familiar with computers, new skills must be acquired. The Internet can be useful not only as an instructional aid in gaining these skills but also as a medium for using these skills on the job.

Just as the Internet is helping some seniors face employment challenges, this new resource is helping others find creative uses for leisure time after retirement. The later years of life are proving for many to be a time of great intellectual and cultural growth. For the first time in their lives, they are enjoying the privilege of learning just what they want to learn, rather than learning what is required for a career. The Internet is enabling seniors to gain these high-quality educational and cultural experiences without ever having to leave the comfort and convenience of their own homes.

But the Internet is not just about personal enrichment or earning money; it's also about *spending* money. The Internet is in effect becoming the world's largest shopping mall, full of well-informed and demanding customers, many of whom are elderly. Those with limited means can find the "best deal" on basic items, and those with more ample resources can shop for an almost unlimited selection of products of all descriptions. Increasingly, elderly Internet consumers are becoming a very lucrative potential market for a growing number of companies. As Baby Boomers age, this generation more technologically and financially sophisticated than any of its predecessors will have a profound effect on the marketing strategies of most companies doing business on the Internet.

Any consideration of the impact of the Internet on the quality of life of older Americans would be incomplete without mentioning the key issue of health care. Whether relatively healthy or suffering from chronic illness, some older Americans will face the challenge of selecting an appropriate medical insurance plan from the many available options. In addition, seniors will be faced with decisions regarding the kind of health care services they will seek. The Internet can serve as an easily available

source of high-quality, up-to-date information to help older Americans make the *right* choices.

A great example of the power of the Internet to enrich an older person's life is John Bennett, from Bossier City, Louisiana. John is 84 years old. Two years ago, he discovered the Internet, and now he just can't get enough of it. Of course, he uses E-Mail to keep in touch with friends and family, but he also surfs the Net looking for information of help to the members of his local Alzheimer's Disease Association chapter. John has taken a leadership role in this organization and even publishes a newsletter drawing on material he gains from the Internet. As use of the Internet spreads among older people, stories like John's will become increasingly common.

For the seniors of today, and even more for the seniors of tomorrow, the Internet is in effect a "doorway of discovery," opening up a world of experience much wider than ever before available. However, we must come to terms with the fact that for many older Americans, the doorway remains closed, whether by lack of information or lack of access. Today, our distinguished moderator and panelists will help us see not only where this exciting new Internet doorway leads but also how to ensure that every older American has the opportunity to pass through it.